

Beyond Postmodernism: A Comprehensive Guide to Critical Realism and the Future of Social Ontology

Published: August 31, 2025 | Index ID: #114

The intellectual landscape of the late 20th century was dominated by the pervasive influence of postmodernism. Characterized by a deep-seated skepticism toward "grand narratives," an emphasis on the fragmentation of identity, and the deconstruction of objective truth, postmodernism provided an essential critique of Enlightenment certainties. However, by the dawn of the 21st century, the limitations of postmodernism—specifically its perceived descent into radical relativism and its inability to provide a robust framework for social change—became increasingly apparent. This theoretical void led to the emergence of the "After Postmodernism" movement, spearheaded by the adoption of **Critical Realism**.

The Theoretical Shift: From Deconstruction to Critical Realism

Critical Realism, as articulated in the seminal work *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* edited by José López and Garry Potter, offers a rigorous alternative to both the naive positivism of the early 20th century and the linguistic idealism of the postmodern era. To understand this shift, one must first recognize the philosophical exhaustion of postmodernism. While postmodernism was effective at dismantling oppressive structures of meaning, it often left researchers and theorists in a state of "epistemological paralysis," where no claim to truth could be prioritized over another.

Critical Realism (CR) intervenes by re-establishing the importance of **ontology** (the study of what exists) over **epistemology** (the study of how we know). It suggests that while our knowledge of the world is socially constructed and fallible, the world itself exists independently of our perceptions. This distinction allows for a science of society that is both critical and realistic.

The Epistemic Fallacy

At the heart of the Critical Realist critique is the concept of the **Epistemic Fallacy**. This occurs when a philosopher or researcher reduces statements about being (ontology) to statements about our knowledge of being (epistemology). Postmodernism frequently commits this fallacy by suggesting that because we can only know the world through discourse, the world is nothing more than discourse. Critical Realism argues that the world has properties and powers that exist regardless of whether we have the language to describe them.

Core Framework: The Stratified Reality of Critical Realism

One of the most significant technical contributions of Critical Realism is the concept of a **stratified ontology**. Unlike positivism, which focuses only on what can be observed (the empirical), Critical Realism identifies three distinct domains of reality:

- **The Empirical:** This consists of experiences and observations. It is the surface level of reality where data is gathered.
- **The Actual:** This includes events and phenomena that occur in the world, whether or not they are observed or experienced by humans.
- **The Real (or Deep):** This is the most profound level, consisting of generative mechanisms, structures, and causal powers. These mechanisms are what produce the events in the domain of the Actual.

Understanding this stratification is crucial for technical analysis in social sciences. For instance, a researcher observing a protest (Empirical) is seeing an event (Actual) triggered by underlying socio-economic structures and power dynamics (The Real).

Generative Mechanisms and Causal Powers

In Critical Realism, causality is not about constant conjunctions (if A, then B). Instead, it is about the **powers** inherent in objects and structures. A magnet has the power to attract iron even if it is not currently doing so. Similarly, social structures (like capitalism or patriarchy) have causal powers that influence human behavior, even if those influences are mediated or neutralized by other competing mechanisms in an **open system**.

Comparative Analysis: Postmodernism vs. Critical Realism vs. Positivism

To evaluate the utility of Critical Realism, it is necessary to compare it against the dominant paradigms it seeks to bridge or replace. The following table provides a technical breakdown of these philosophical positions.

Feature	Positivism	Postmodernism	Critical Realism
Ontology	Flat (The Empirical is the Real)	Anti-realist (Reality is a social construct)	Stratified (Empirical, Actual, and Real)
Epistemology	Objective observation of facts	Relativism/Subjectivism	Rational Judgement/Epistemic Relativism
Goal of Research	Prediction and law-like generalizations	Deconstruction and irony	Explanation of generative mechanisms
View of Science	Universal and value-free	A local narrative or power play	A fallible but progressive pursuit of truth
Agency vs. Structure	Focus on individual behavior	Focus on discursive positioning	Dialectical relationship (The TMSA)

Technical Methodology: The Logic of Retroduction

Critical Realist research does not rely solely on induction (gathering instances to form a rule) or deduction (testing a hypothesis). Instead, it utilizes **Retroduction**. This is a technical process of reasoning that moves from the observation of an event to the conceptualization of the structures that must exist for that event to have occurred.

Step-by-Step Retroductive Workflow

1. Phenomenon Identification: Start with an observed event or pattern in the Empirical domain (e.g., a sudden increase in local unemployment).
2. Theoretical Description: Describe the event using existing technical vocabulary and historical context.
3. Retroductive Questioning: Ask: "What must the world be like for this event to occur?" What mechanisms (economic, social, psychological) must be at work?
4. Elimination of Alternatives: Test various hypothetical mechanisms against the data. Which mechanism has the most explanatory power?
5. Identification of Generative Mechanisms: Isolate the underlying structures (e.g., shifts in global capital flows) that are producing the observed effects.

The Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA)

A core challenge in social theory is the relationship between the individual (agency) and society (structure). Postmodernism often collapses this into discourse. Critical Realism, specifically through Roy Bhaskar's **TMSA**, provides a more sophisticated model. It argues that:

- Society pre-exists the individual (we are born into existing structures).
- Individuals do not create society; they reproduce or transform it through their actions.
- Structures provide the conditions for action, but they do not determine it.

This model is essential for technical social engineering and policy analysis. It suggests that to change a social outcome, one must target the underlying structures rather than merely attempting to change individual behaviors in isolation.

From Postmodernism to Metamodernism: The Cultural Evolution

While Critical Realism provides the philosophical bedrock, the cultural manifestation of this shift is often termed **Metamodernism**. Metamodernism oscillates between a modern commitment to progress and a postmodern skepticism. It adopts the "as if" strategy: acting with purpose and sincerity even while acknowledging the fallibility and potential absurdity of our efforts.

Comparison of Metamodernism and Critical Realism

Critical Realism serves as the *scientific methodology* for this new era, while Metamodernism describes the *cultural sensibility*. Both movements reject the cynical detachment of postmodernism in favor of a renewed engagement with the real world. In the context of the JSON data provided, the movement "After Postmodernism" represents this synthesis—a desire to move beyond deconstruction toward **reconstruction**.

Practical Implementation: Integrating Critical Realism in Research Design

For technical writers and researchers, applying Critical Realism involves a shift in how data is interpreted. Below is a guide for integrating these principles into a technical study or social analysis.

1. Define the System Boundary

Recognize that social phenomena occur in **open systems**. Unlike a laboratory (a closed system), real-world social outcomes are the result of multiple, often conflicting, mechanisms. Researchers must account for "countervailing forces" that might mask the effects of a specific mechanism.

2. Incorporate Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) Configurations

Used extensively in realist evaluation, the CMO configuration is a technical tool for understanding **causal complexity**:

- Context: Under what conditions does the mechanism fire?
- Mechanism: The underlying causal power or reaction.
- Outcome: The resulting Empirical observation.

3. Avoid the "Success/Failure" Binary

In technical evaluations, postmodernism might argue success is subjective, while positivism looks for a p-value. Critical Realism asks: "What works for whom, in what circumstances, and why?" This provides a much higher level of granular detail for stakeholders and policy makers.

Case Study: Analyzing Modern Economic Disparity

To demonstrate the depth of a Critical Realist analysis compared to postmodernist deconstruction, consider the issue of global economic disparity.

Postmodern Approach

A postmodern analysis would focus on the **discourse** of poverty. It would analyze how the term "underdeveloped" is a linguistic construct used by Western powers to maintain hegemony. While valuable, it offers little in terms of structural solutions.

Critical Realist (After Postmodernism) Approach

The Critical Realist identifies the **Real** structures: the mechanisms of debt-based finance, international trade laws, and the historical causal powers of colonial infrastructure. The analysis would use **retroduction** to show how these structures produce the **Actual** events of market crashes and the **Empirical** data of Gini coefficients. The solution then becomes structural reform, not just discursive shifting.

Addressing Common Challenges and Misconceptions

Transitioning to a Critical Realist framework is not without technical hurdles. Researchers often struggle with the transition from empirical data to ontological claims.

Challenge	Description	Solution/Technical Fix
Over-theorizing Mechanisms	Claiming a mechanism exists without sufficient evidence.	Employ rigorous triangulation of data and peer review of retroductive steps.
Conflating Levels	Treating Empirical observations as the absolute Real.	Always distinguish between the event and the cause.
Structure Determinism	Assuming structures dictate all human action.	Re-incorporate the TMSA model to account for human agency and reflexivity.

Summary of Broader Implications

The shift signaled by *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* represents a maturing of social theory. By reclaiming the concept of a "real" world that is accessible, though not perfectly mirrorable, through science, we regain the ability to make ethical and political judgments. This is not a return to the naive certainties of the past, but a move toward a **critical** understanding of our fallibility.

The move away from postmodernism does not mean ignoring its lessons. The insights regarding power, language, and subjectivity remain vital. However, Critical Realism integrates these insights into a more robust, stratified ontology. This allows for a technical and scientific approach that is capable of addressing the complex, multi-layered crises of the modern world—from climate change to systemic inequality. In an era often described as "post-truth," the technical rigor of Critical Realism provides a necessary anchor, asserting that while our truths may be plural, the reality they attempt to describe is singular, complex, and profoundly consequential.

Ultimately, the move "after postmodernism" is a move toward responsibility. It is an acknowledgment that our theories have real-world impacts and that a commitment to understanding the generative mechanisms of our social reality is the first step toward meaningfully transforming it. As researchers and technical analysts, the adoption of a Critical Realist framework ensures that our work is not merely a play of signifiers, but a rigorous engagement with the structures that shape human life.

Baca Juga (Artikel Terkait)

• [Afrocentricity: A Technical and Philosophical Analysis of the Theory of Social Change](http://alaskawriters.com/afrocentricity-theory-social-change-molefi-kete-asante.pdf)

URL: <http://alaskawriters.com/afrocentricity-theory-social-change-molefi-kete-asante.pdf>

Tags: #Critical Realism #Postmodernism #Social Ontology #Metamodernism #Research Methodology

